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## Gender-Based Domestic Violence against Children: Experiences of Girl-Children in Nigeria

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This study investigated the dynamics of gender-based domestic violence against children in Nigeria. This qualitative study explored the experiences of 20 purposively selected girl-children (age range = 12 to 15 years) from two SOS Children's Village who have been victims of Domestic Violence (DV). Qualitative data on DV experiences and associated factors were collected through 6 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Physical violence was reported by 90% of the participants; psychological abuse by 80% and violent sexual abuse (rape) by 10%. Major factors associated with last episode of DV experiences included: inability to finish selling wares that were being hawked, late preparation of food, getting home late from the market, burning of the employer's cloth while ironing, refusal to be genitally cut and refusal to be raped by the man of the house. Self-reported consequences of DV by victims included amongst others: constant headaches (30%) physical injury (25%), sleep disturbances (20%), excessive fear and anxiety (10%), hatred for men (10%) and suicidal ideation (5%). These findings suggest that DV may be playing significant but salient role in the poor state of health of Nigerian children and effective intervention processes at all levels are needed to address it.

*Keywords: children; Nigeria; domestic violence; gender-based.*

### Introduction

Homes are intended to nurture the development of children. Yet, violence is a regular part of a child's experience in Nigeria. Domestic Violence (DV) refers to violence within the home. It is carried out mostly against women and children. These acts include rape (forced sex), physical abuse, verbal abuse, incest, FGC (Female Genital Cutting), denial of food, denial of time for relaxation, forced marriage and child marriage (Joda et al, 2007). Typically, it is committed within the framework of the family, by one of its members. Domestic violence undermines the life, the bodily or psychological integrity, or the liberty of another member of the same family, or seriously harms the development of his or her personality (Vetere & Copper, 2003 p.62).

*Gender Violence:* On a daily basis women around the world are beaten and "punished" for supposed transgressions, raped and even murdered by members of their family. In some cases, vicious acid attacks leave them with horrific disfigurements. Girls and young women are forced into early marriage by parents and relatives. In many communities in Nigeria (Fatusi & Alatise, 2006), the traditional practice of female genital mutilation continues to traumatize young girls and leave women with lifelong pain and damage to their health. Such violence is all too frequently excused and tolerated in communities where women are assigned an inferior role, subordinate to the male head of the family. As noted by Narayans et al (2000 p.123) in 'many social contexts, domestic violence is supported by social norms such as a cultural ideology which promotes the primacy of men over the women' Husbands, partners and fathers are responsible for most of the violence against women. The violence persists because discriminatory laws condone and even legalise certain forms of violence against women. Dismissive attitudes

within the police and an inaccessible justice system compound the failures of the state to protect women's rights.

Violence is not gender-specific as both boys and girls are victims of violence. However, there is enough gender-specific violence which underlies the subordinate position of the girl-child in Nigeria to warrant a focus on the girl-child as victims of violence. These are few examples of gender specific violence as reported by Adidu (2001, p.87).

*In 1987, a 12 year old Hausa girl, Abubakar from northern Nigeria died after having both legs amputated by her husband for repeatedly running away from him after she was forced to marry him.*

*In 1999, in Zaria, Nigeria, a jealous lover poured acid on his girl friend when she would not marry him. He had earlier threatened to render her unmarriageable if she ever dumped him and he made good his promise.*

In Nigeria, the girl-child is frequently victimized twice. First by the violence she endures, and by the failure of the governments to bring her abuser(s) to justice.

*Sometime in 1999, an uncle sexually assaulted a little girl of six years old. The matter was taken to court and prosecuted. In giving judgment however, the magistrate set the accused person free for lack of "corroboration". This was in spite of the bloodied pants, the testimony of the mother who noticed the pains while bathing her, and the medical evidence from a government hospital. The magistrate said corroboration meant testimony from another person who witnessed the alleged act (Except of interview with a human rights defender by Amnesty International, 2004).*

"Fatima", a domestic worker aged 12 years old, was reported to have been doused with kerosene and set on fire after

she was accused of stealing meat from her employer. The alleged perpetrator of this heinous crime was charged in connection with her death but the outcome of the case was not known. (*The Guardian Newspaper, 22, July, 2002*). Furthermore, a certain young girl “Folake” was jailed after she accused a man of rape. A domestic worker, she said her employer’s husband had forced her into his bedroom and made her watch a pornographic film before forcing her to have sex. A medical examination supported her allegation. Yet she was the one brought to court, charged with slander for making the accusation and remanded in prison (Amnesty International Interview with “Folake”, 2004). Girl-children experience physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Girl-children who are domestic workers are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and sexual violence from men and boys living in or associated with the household. The domestic girl-child is at increased risk of sexual harassment and assault. The true dimensions of sexual violence against women and girl domestic workers may never be known; under-reporting of such cases is significant due to workers’ isolation and the deep social stigma attached to sexual assault (Adidu, 2001).

Almost without exception, the domestic girl-children interviewed by Human Rights Watch around the world suffered some form of psychological abuse. Verbal abuse: harsh insults, threats and belittlement often accompanies physical abuse and takes place in an overall context of excessive workloads, sleep deprivation, insufficient or poor quality food, and substandard living conditions (Project Alert, 2001).

*Consequences of Violence Against Children*

Violence against children has incalculable costs to present and future generations and it undermines human development (UNAIDS, UNICEF & USAID, 2002). Violence against children limits a child’s personal growth, her productivity, her socio-economic roles, and her physical and psychological health. Most of all it negates the right of children as humans. According to Bunch (1997:42), violence debilitates women and girls physically, psychologically and socially, sometimes with lifelong results. Besides, women’s aspirations and achievements are powerfully inhibited, not just by the injuries of physical attacks but by the implicit threat to social development (Naaeke, 2006). Domestic violence is a key component of social problems including street children, child labour and being involved in commercial sex work. Again by subjecting the girl-child to physical violence and abuse and without a social structure that endeavours to stop this practice, the girl-children could be made to believe that they are actually inferior to their counterparts and that they deserve the abuse. This can affect their self-image and perception of men in general.

*Goals of the Study:* The study sought to explore gender-based domestic violence against children in Nigeria and factors associated with its occurrence. This study is pertinent and significant especially in the wake of increases in gender-based violence against children in Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought answers to the following questions from participants:

1. What are the types of domestic violence experienced by girl-children who are domestic worker?
2. What are the self-reported consequences of domestic violence experienced by girl-children who are domestic workers?

**Method**

*Participants and Setting:* Recruitment of participants for the study was purposive in nature, guided by the information provided by the two SOS Children’s Village directors. Thus the participants for the study comprised 20 girls (age range 12-15 years) who were living in two SOS Children’s Village in Nigeria.

The majority of the participants (50%) were 14 years old (Table 1). Twelve of them representing (60%) of the total participants were Muslims while 8 (40%) of them were Christians. Most (70%) of the participants were from polygamous homes, while only 2(10%) of the participants came from homes where their parents/Care givers/employers had tertiary education. Table 1 also showed that the participants come from different parts of Nigeria with the Yorubas constituting the highest (60%).

*Procedure:* Prior to the commencement of the programme, permission to conduct the study was sought from the two SOS Children’s Village directors who assisted the researcher to identify victims of Domestic Violence (DV) among the children. Thereafter, the participants’ consent was sought and obtained. At first some of the children were afraid of exposure and reluctant to participate in the programme. However, on assurance that the programme was for research purposes only and that it was not a prelude to their being sent back home, all the purposively selected participants agreed to take part. They were equally assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

*Instrument:* The data collection exercise was mainly through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Focus group discussions produce descriptive data about people’s own written or spoken and observable behaviour. Each discussion lasted for an average of 1 hour 10 minutes and revolved around three major

**Table 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Participants**

Characteristics	Frequency (N=20)	%
<b>Age</b>		
12 years	2	10.0
13 years	3	15.0
14 years	10	50.0
15 years	5	25.0
<b>Family Structure</b>		
Monogamy	6	30.0
Polygamy	14	70.0
<b>Religion</b>		
Christianity	8	40.0
Islam	12	60.0
<b>Educational Status of Parents/Guardians</b>		
No formal Education	10	50.0
Primary	6	30.0
Secondary	2	10.0
Tertiary	2	10.0
<b>Tribe</b>		
Hausa	12	60.0
Yoruba	6	30.0
Ibo	2	10.0

themes: Physical violence, psychological/emotional abuse and sexual abuse (rape). The themes were adopted from an operational definition of domestic violence by the United Nations Declaration on Elimination of Violence against Women (United Nations, 2002). Recording of the FGDs sessions was made through note-taking and also by the use of audio-cassettes.

Toward this end, 6 focus group discussions (3 for each village) were held with the participants. Having a social worker, who is a counselling psychologist, present in the sessions provided the needed emotional support to the children. Again, the researchers themselves are professional counsellors who are competent in dealing with psychological and emotional problems of traumatised children.

**Data Analysis:** Descriptive analysis was used for the demographic characteristics of the participants and to present the types of domestic violence experienced by the participants. The transcription of the recorded audio cassettes, together with the recorded field notes, provided data for the thematic analysis. Transcripts were read and annotated. Multiple readings of the transcripts were undertaken to identify major themes or ideas revealed by the group members as well as critical words, phrases and examples. The experiences of the participants were compared and contrasted, searching for patterns either made explicitly by participants or derived implicitly. Important and frequently expressed ideas or themes were then studied for pattern of connection and grouped into broader categories. The main themes in the data formed a picture that reflected the experiences of all the girls in the study.

## Results

### *Type of Domestic Violence Experienced by participants*

All the participants indicated that they have experienced one form of domestic violence or the other. Physical violence was the commonest amongst the participants (90%). This was followed by psychological/emotional violence (80%) while 10% reported sexual abuse.

The common forms of physical violence experienced by the participants were severe flogging, slapping, pushing, restraints (tying), beatings, kicking and choking. One of the participants remarked:

*\*one day my hands and legs were severely tied with a rope for coming home late from the market and for not finishing the sale of my wares. When I was rescued by neighbours, I was bleeding from the wounds sustained from the injury.*

Another added:

*\*Right from the day I entered my guardian's house as a house help till the day I ran away, it has always been one form of excessive physical violence or the other from all the members of the family: If it is not "Daddy" flogging me for one minor offense or the other, it will be "Mummy" slapping, pushing and kicking me. Even their son beats me for no just cause.*

Yet another added:

*\*At times I will be so beaten to a point of unconsciousness*

The violence experienced by the children was not only physical but included psychological violence in the forms of verbal abuse involving severe criticisms, name calling, intimidation, threats, humiliation and/or isolation.

One participant reported:

*\*As a HIV/AIDS orphaned child, I was never allowed to mix and play with other children in the house. My uncle and auntie were always threatening to eject me from their home if I flout their orders.*

Another participant added:

*\*I never seem to do anything right in the sight of my guardian. I was always being criticised and called all kinds of names including "omo aje" (i.e., a witch's daughter)*

On the issue of sexual abuse two participants reported how they were sexually violated by their guardian/employer.

### *Factors Associated with the Last Incidence of DV*

The Focus Group Discussions revealed the following factors as having triggered the last incidence of DV: inability to finish selling wares that were being hawked (30%); late preparation of food (20%); getting home late from the market (20%); burning of the employer's cloth while ironing (10%); refusal to be genitally cut (10%) and refusal to be raped by the man of the house (10%). (See Table 2).

### *Self-Reported Consequences of Domestic Violence by Participants*

The self-reported effects of domestic violence by the children are as shown in Table 3. The commonest health-related effects were physical in nature: Constant headache was reported by 30% of the participants while 25% of them reported having sustained one form of physical injury or the other. Psy-

**Table 2. Major Factors Associated with the Last Episode of Domestic Violence Experiences as Reported by the Participants**

Main Cause	Frequency (n=20)	%
Inability to finish selling wares that were being hawked	6	30
Late preparation of food	4	20
Getting home late from the market	4	20
Burning of my guardian's cloth while ironing	2	10
Refusal to be genitally cut	2	10
Refusal to be raped by the man of the house	2	10

**Table 3. Self-Reported Consequences of Domestic Violence by Victims**

	Frequency (n=20)	%
Constant headaches	6	30
Physical injury	5	25
Sleep disturbances/Nightmares	4	20
Excessive fear and anxiety	2	10
Hatred against men	2	10
Suicidal ideation	1	5



chological effects of domestic violence as reported by the participants included: Sleep disturbances/nightmares (15%); excessive fear and anxiety (15%); hatred for men (10%) and suicidal ideation (5%).

### Discussion

This study investigated gender-based domestic violence against children in Nigeria. Domestic violence is a common occurrence in most Nigerian families and it is a major threat to health. It inflicts physical, psychological and emotional pain on the victims. The self-reported consequences of domestic violence found in this study including suicidal ideation and other health problems, suggest that gender-based domestic violence may be playing significant but salient role in the poor state of health of Nigerian children.

The findings of this study indicate that gender-based domestic violence in Nigeria is a common practice. For instance, 90% of the participants reported having been abused physically by their parents/guardians or employers. This finding lends credence to the research findings of Odujirin (1999) who reported prevalence of 68.1% for physical abuse among women in Lagos. Psychological and sexual abuse reported by participants in this study is consistent with previous studies in Nigeria and elsewhere (Odimegwu, 1997; Gottman & Jacobson, 1998; Okemgbo, 2000; Okemgbo, Adidu, 2001; Bhowon & Munbauhal, 2005; Fatusi, & Alatise, 2006; Mahlatji & Donald, 2006; Naaeke, 2006). Countless women and girls in Nigeria are subjected to violence by some members of their families and within their communities. The findings emanating from this study as to major factors associated with the last incidence of violence against the participants are in consonance with the result of other Nigerian studies (Odimegwu, 1997; Okemgbo, 2000; Okemgbo, Okemgbo & Odimegwu, 2002) as well as findings of Amnesty International (2004) as documented in this study.

These findings strongly suggest that the major triggering factors associated with gender-based domestic violence in Nigeria have their roots in the cultural framework of the society which ascribes lower status to girls and women compared to boys and men and upholds male dominance over women. As a social 'construct of power' (Bunch 1997, p. 44), gender-based domestic violence can be changed.

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